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## Consumers choosing local meat products

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Photo by James Roberts, Staff Writer

By James Roberts, Staff Writer

Penn's Hams worker Paul Bottoms checks a ham during the curing process. For the past 50 years, Penn's Hams has provided various hams, sausages and varieties of bacon directly to consumers using owner Donald Penn's family recipe.

With prices on the rise, more consumers are looking directly to farms for their meat purchases.

Taylor County farmer Jeff Arnold said he sells about 25 cows a year directly to consumers. Some buy half a cow, while others buy a quarter.

That number can increase when retail meat prices rise, he said.

"When the price goes up at the grocery store, they kind of look at other options," Arnold said. "We also slaughter one every eight to 10 months for our own use."

Buying directly is cheaper, Arnold said, with beef prices ranging from \$1.50 to \$1.60 per pound.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average price of 100 percent ground beef was \$2.38 a pound in February, 15 cents higher than just two months earlier.

"Based strictly on my observations and conversations with producers, this activity continues to expand," said Kenneth H. Burdine, extension specialist with UK's College of Agriculture. "In the past, producers would sell animals or sides directly to consumers who would have the animals processed. One real challenge here is that fewer consumers have deep freezers and are able to purchase meat in large quantities."

While some farmers process the meat for sale at farmers' markets, "freezer meat" is still common, Burdine said. Taylor County boasts two meat-processing companies - Wise Custom Meat Processing and J.W. McFarland Custom Meat Processing. The county is also home to Penn's Hams, which offers whole country hams, cooked country hams, country cured bacon, smoked jowl bacon, sausage and a variety of gift boxes.

Direct sales benefit all involved, Burdine said.

"Producers are usually able to receive better prices and sell products



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locally," he said. "Consumers cite many benefits. Many will say that the product is of superior quality or that it is fresher. Most beef sold direct is processed in small processing plants where carcasses are permitted to age longer. This improves taste and tenderness. Some will say they prefer to buy locally from someone they can see and talk to. Others like the idea of supporting local farmers."

And with the recent beef recall, the safety of beef weighs heavily on consumers' minds, Burdine said.

"A lot of consumers will say that they perceive locally produced meat to be safer. This is something that many producers will discuss in their marketing. Good direct marketers tend to be sales people and they build relationships with their clientele."

Penn's Hams manager Kim Honadel said customers find a wider selection when they buy direct.

"They can come out here and they can see the process," she said. "They can see the product. And they are able to pick from a wider variety of products."

Penn's Hams receives pork from Swift & Co. in Louisville the day after the animals have been slaughtered. Workers immediately begin to cure and process the products using the Penn's family recipe. The process takes from four to eight months.

The homegrown company's products have attracted the taste buds of customers through the area, Honadel said.

"We sell to consumers in all the surrounding counties. We have some come from as far away as Indiana, Ohio and West Virginia."

Throughout Kentucky, consumers looking to buy their meat directly from the farmer can find a variety of options, Burdine said.

"There is a lot of beef, pork, lamb and goat sold as freezer meat through farmers' markets and direct to restaurants."

Buying direct is quickly becoming an attractive option to consumers, Arnold said.

"More and more people are doing it," Arnold said. "They like the quality and they like knowing where the meat comes from."

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